1: Blackwood E-5 (1929-1930) 1935
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Kurtatchi

I

THE COUNTRY AND THE PEOPLE

ALTHOUGH the French navigator, Bougainville, discovered the island which bears his name in 1768, and also sailed up the coast of Buka, the north-western end of the long chain of the Solomon Islands seems to have been left more or less to itself long after the south-eastern portion of the archipelago was beginning to be known. On the map illustrating Codrington's book *The Melanesians*, published in 1891, Buka is represented as an unnamed peninsula attached to the northern extremity of Bougainville. The first reference I can find to the strip of water that actually divides the island of Buka from its much larger south-eastern neighbour is that of Parkinson (1907, p. 467), who, using its German name of Kõnig Albert Strasse, says that he was the first white man to traverse it, which he did in 1886. It is hardly surprising that this strait, now called Buka Passage, was missed by the early explorers, since it is scarcely half a mile wide for most of its two miles or so of length, and is narrowest towards its eastern end, past which they seem to have sailed, probably at a respectful distance, for tides and currents are tricky hereabouts, and the reefs exceedingly dangerous.

Northwards from the western end of 'The Passage' stretches the long coral reef which skirts the western coast of Buka, at a distance of about two miles from the shore. It is marked by a line of surf at its edge, and studded with a string of tiny coral islands, of which Petats, my first place of residence, is one. Between Petats and the next island, Yamẽ, the reef is exposed at low tide, so that it is possible to walk from one to the other, but between Yamẽ and Pororan, a distance of perhaps eight or ten miles, there is a gap in the reef allowing small vessels to pass. The expanse of water between the reef and the Buka shore (locally known as 'the lagoon', though it is open at both ends) is usually calm, though short sharp storms are apt to arise suddenly. The bottom affords good anchorage, and this, combined with the fact that the hills of Buka stand away a little, in many places, from the coast, has led to the establishment of several coco-nut plantations on the west side of the

[p. 1]

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133 island. On the east side there are precipitous cliffs either dropping straight to the shore or leaving just enough space on the beach for [361] a row of native huts, fronting the open sea. A reef skirts this coast also, but close inshore.

131 The island of Buka is about thirty-five miles long, and eight or
133 nine wide at the widest part, narrowing very much at both ends.
137 Its most northerly point extends almost to latitude 5° S., its longitude being 154° 40′. The interior of the southern half of the island is covered with thickly forested hills, formed of dolomitic limestone, fairly steep in places but of no great height, dotted with native villages. The northern half is flat, and its interior is used by the natives principally for their gardens, the villages here being confined to the coast. There are no rivers on the east side, but on the west the coast-line is broken by several small streams and one larger river, the Gagan, formed by the junction of two streams about a couple of miles from its mouth. It is lined by mangrove [136] swamps full of crocodiles, and provides the natives with abundance of river reeds to use for thatch in default of sago-palm which is rather scarce.

133 Bougainville is one of the largest of the Solomon Islands, about 160 miles in length with a width of 35–40 miles. This book is concerned with the inhabitants of its northern shore. At 'The Passage' the land is almost flat, but as one passes westwards there is a gradual rise, till about ten miles from the western end the cliffs have reached a height of perhaps 200 to 250 feet. They consist of dolo- [417] mitic limestone, dropping steeply to the sea, but climbable in many places with the aid of notched logs at the steepest parts (see Pl. 2 *a*). They are covered with vegetation wherever a crack or a crevice enables the smallest amount of soil to accumulate. A coral reef comprising many species, but largely composed of a variety of Hexacorallia,[1] lines the shore. At its outer edge great breakers crash incessantly on all but a very few days in the year, making it an exciting business to launch a canoe through the surf. Owing to the difficulty of approaching it by sea, this portion of the coast [341] offers little inducement to white settlers, and is occupied by a string of native villages, among them Kurtatchi, my head-quarters for nine months. Towards the north-eastern corner of the island

[1] For the identification of this and other geological specimens which I brought home I am indebted to Mr. C. J. Bayzand, University Demonstrator in Geology, Oxford.

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PLATE I

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a. BUKA PASSAGE

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b. BEACH AT TARONGEN

[facing p.2]

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the coast is broken by three large inlets, allowing of safe anchorage for schooners, with comparatively easy access to the shore, and so affording sites for coco-nut plantations, maintained for the production of copra, which, except for a little fishing for trochus shell, is the only possibility the country offers to white men. Between and behind these plantations are more native villages. The hinterland soon breaks into foot-hills, and behind these rises range after range of heavily forested mountains, a difficult region, much of which has not yet been explored. The interior is volcanic, culminating, as far as the northern half of the island is concerned, in the active volcano Balbi (9,500 ft.), an object of mysterious dread to the natives, who place there the home of their dead.

The peninsula at the north-western end of the island, the scene of many of the activities described in the following pages, slopes gently down from the cliffs on its northern shore, to a flat sandy beach bordering the bay which forms its southern boundary, some five miles distant (Pl. 1 *b*). The interior of this peninsula is covered with what I take to be secondary forest; the whole of it has probably been cleared at one time or another by the natives for their taro gardens, the positions of which they must change frequently.

A cleared track, known as 'the Government road', runs round the greater part of the coast of Buka, and, in places, when sufficiently dry, is possible for wheeled vehicles, enabling the planters to run a lorry for the collection of copra. There is a similar road along the north coast of Bougainville and down the east coast for some ninety miles, as far as Kieta, the place of residence of the District Officer and the only settlement other than isolated plantations on the island. This road is, in dry weather, also practicable for wheeled traffic for rather more than ten miles to the east of Buka Passage, but after that it encounters the Umu Mountains, which, though not high, are steep, and thenceforward a succession of rivers (innocent of bridges) and hilly patches make it improbable that the road will be available for any but pedestrians for a long time to come. It affords pleasant walking, and is much used by the natives in their numerous comings and goings, to visit relatives, to exchange commodities, or merely for fun. The people of each village are held responsible for keeping in traversable condition the stretch of road for a certain distance on either side of their village. They are supposed to work on it one day a week. The women do most of the work.

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PLATE 3

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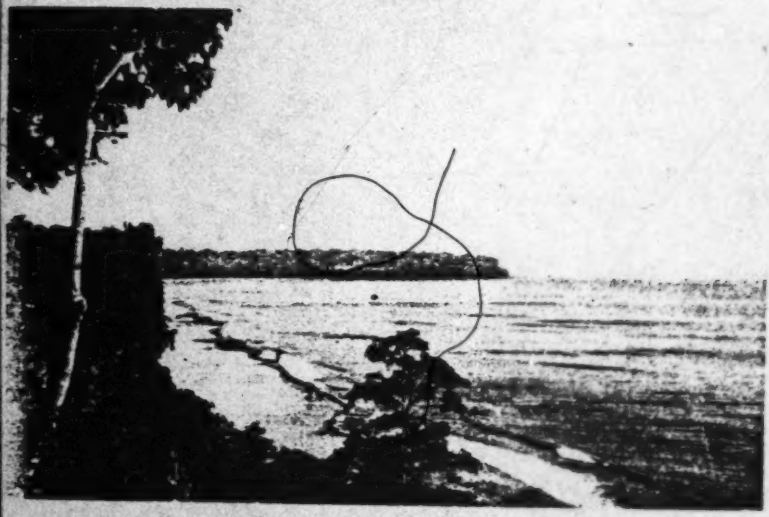

a. VIEW FROM CLIFFS AT KURTATCHI

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b. NEW-STYLE HOUSES, BUKA

[facing p. 20]

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226 824 *Riro* (*Morinda citrifolia*).

Get some leaves; split them away from the mid-rib. Add a little *sisima*, and rub it on your hand. Then chew the root with betel-mixture, spit it on to your hand which holds the other mixture, and rub both on line.

4. *Fishing kite.*

226 ● 133 While the three former methods are practised either inside or outside the reef, kite-fishing is generally confined to the smooth water between the reef and the shore, or in otherwise sheltered water. The term 'lagoon' is current locally to indicate any such stretch of sheltered water, not necessarily so fully enclosed as in the case of the lagoons of atolls, which are rarely found in this area. It is applied, for example, to the stretch of sea between the west coast of Buka and its fringing reef, from which rises the string of islands including Petats and Pororan, though the protecting reef is open at both ends and has gaps in it. In fair weather, this stretch of water is very suitable for kite-fishing, and it was there that I saw it being carried on. The people of the north coast of Bougainville are also acquainted with the fishing kite, but they use it less frequently, as in order to do so they have to go across the peninsula to the relatively sheltered water of Soraken bay, the open sea off their own villages being unsuitable.

226 171 *Distribution.* Kite-fishing is remarkable not only for its ingenuity, but also for its geographical distribution. This is discussed in a paper by H. Balfour (1913, p. 583), who traces it from a probable centre of dispersion 'somewhere in the eastern area of the Malayan Archipelago', as one of a series of cultural objects whose distribution can be followed over an area stretching from Singapore to Santa Cruz.

227 [824] *Construction.* The kite (*vavatoa*, P.) is made of five fronds of the sago-palm leaf, of which the two outer ones have the leaf stripped from one side of the mid-rib which thus acts as a stiff outside edge. The central leaf is turned back from its mid-rib for about a third of its length, which projects to form a tail to which is attached the string trailing the lure, towards the tip, and the string held by the fisherman, at the end of the split-off portion. This string is again fastened lower down the mid-rib, by means of a loose loop. The doubled leaf forms the central part of the body of the kite; two others, with the mid-rib stripped off, are stitched to either side of it,

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If a boy wearing the *upi* enters a hut in which a woman lives. Present punishment, some one will 'make poison' so that he will die, and no one will know who did it. 266 689

If a woman sees the *amro* carrying food to the novices during their seclusion in the bush prior to the first puberty ceremony (see p. 201). Present punishment, all the *amro* and all the *kwigin* have sexual intercourse with her. 266 688

Cannibalism is now prohibited under the jurisdiction of the white man, and no longer takes place, even in secret, I believe, among the coastal people. How long it is since the last person was eaten it was impossible to ascertain; most of the older men in the village of Kurtatchi confessed—or perhaps I should say boasted—that they had eaten man, with what truth I cannot say. None of the younger or middle-aged men claimed to have done so. I was told that the practice is still carried on by the people of the mountainous interior of Bougainville, and as these have not yet, in some areas, come under white supervision, it may well be that this is the case. 266 177

THE PLACE OF THE *URAR*

This account of the after-world was obtained from Sobak, an elderly man. The details have all been subsequently corroborated in accounts given by other individuals, or in the course of discussions arising out of certain myths and stories. 775

The place where people go when they die is ruled over by two brothers, named Tosisiup and Magor. Tosisiup is big, Magor is little. The home of both is the volcano called Tupa'i.[1] Tosisiup lives at the top. When he likes he makes fire come out of it. Magor lives under it. When he turns himself there is an earthquake. Tosisiup tells him to stop making the ground shake, because he is sorry for all the people who fall down. [823]

All the people who die go to the volcano. When a man is going to die, fire comes up out of it. Magor prepares food for him and puts fire in the food. He cooks taro to give to the man who dies. The man goes and sits down in front of Tosisiup. Magor asks him: 'What are you doing?' 'I am dead. Somebody has made poison for me.' Tosisiup says: 'Don't you know who it was? I

[1] This is the active volcano in the northern half of Bougainville, which appears on the map as Balbi. It is not the same as the volcano which figures in the beliefs of the Buin of South Bougainville, called Bareka or Bagano (cf. Wheeler, 1914, p. 103, &c.). [133]

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rocks called Kes, from a fancied similarity to a shark. These are not supposed to be connected with *urar*, neither is there usually any story attached to them.

STONE PILLARS

All the stones hitherto mentioned are natural formations. But there are also some in this area which show definite traces of human handiwork, being shaped like pillars, and, in some cases, having designs incised upon them. I visited five of these, and heard of at least two others which appear to belong to the same category. Unfortunately, the information I was able to obtain about them is very meagre.

Notes on the stone pillar at Yamē

Yamē is the island next to Petats on the north, forming part of the same reef. At the present time the whole island is being used as a coco-nut plantation, and there are no natives on it except indentured plantation hands, most of whom come from other localities. But once it was inhabited by Buka natives, just as Petats and Pororan still are.

The stone is on the south-western side of the island, between two rows of coco-nut trees, some hundred yards or so from the cliff-edge. It is probably not in the situation which it occupied when it was first set up. It was not standing when I saw it, but prone on the ground. Only a portion of it remains, a length of about 3 feet, the bottom part being obviously broken off. Its diameter is rather less than a foot at the bottom, its widest part. It tapered slightly towards the top, which was rounded. There were no designs on it.

None of the available natives knew much about it. One said its name was Tahuni, but he could give me no meaning for the name. Once it had a spirit (*maselai* in pidgin-English) belonging to it, but there are no spirits left on Yamē any more. Another native said it was a stone 'belonging to the mosquitoes', and that the Pororan people took it away on a raft a long time ago when it was a little stone; they wanted to use it as a pillow, but just as they were going to land at Pororan (the next island, about ten miles off) it jumped overboard and swam back to Yamē. There it grew large. It used to be taller than a man, but now it is broken. No one could tell me how it was broken, or what had become of the rest of it.